

What We Can Learn About Resilience From Female Leaders Of The UN

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It's difficult enough to stay resilient in the face of high demands and changing circumstances. Imagine adding extreme physical conditions, threats to personal safety, natural disasters, armed conflict, large numbers of traumatized people, minimal infrastructure, and complex, multi-stakeholder relations to your list of challenges. Through my leadership development work with the United Nations (UN), I've been privileged to work with professionals who operate in some of the world's most challenging contexts. Their missions' success rests on their ability to stay resilient and perform effectively in adverse circumstances.

The following principles of resilience, illustrated with the stories of UN women leaders I've worked with recently, will serve you well in any work context, even one that's not as dire as what these women face on a daily basis.

Purpose. A strong sense of purpose serves as a foundation for resilience by sustaining meaning. Consider Roueida El Hage, who heads the Regional Human Rights Office in Erbil for the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq. Her team investigates and reports human rights violations, such as the ongoing [genocide of the Yazidi minority by the Islamic State](#), also known as ISIS. She has also conducted human rights investigations in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, and Libya. The work, though sometimes harrowing, is essential for advocacy and assistance for victims and for achieving justice.

To conduct interviews, El Hage and her team go to places including prisons and camps for people who have been driven from their homes by conflict. “These people are traumatized. They’re often in need of basics like food and medical care. It can be very hard to see people suffering and not have any aid to give, any food to offer,” she says. Staying focused on her purpose keeps her strong. “Objective reporting is vital for advocacy, which leads to aid. It’s by doing high-quality, objective reporting that we help alleviate suffering.”

Kristin Dadey has managed programs for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN migration agency, for the past 15 years. She has learned to perform amid chaos through past postings: the former Soviet republic of Georgia during the 2008 Russian invasion, Cairo during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, and Indonesia at the time of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. “In humanitarian work, you can usually tell right away who’s going to be resilient: the people who truly care about and are committed to helping others. The people who are in it for the thrill, the adrenaline junkies — they tend to burn out.”

Progress. As Special Assistant to the Resident Coordinator, Linnea Van Wagenen coordinates the activities of the 17 different agencies that make up the United Nations Integrated Office for Sierra Leone. The West African nation was devastated by civil war from 1991 to 2002, suffered a major Ebola outbreak from 2014 to 2015, and lost more than 1,000 people in a major mudslide near the capital city of Freetown on August 14, 2017. These UN agencies are hotbeds of activity, with dozens of initiatives in various stages of progress. Van Wagenen says that, to stay resilient, “a key strategy is having

many different projects on my whiteboard — and knowing what I should be working on now, versus what is in someone else's hands.”

As with seeds tossed onto rocky soil, Van Wagenen accepts that not all projects will germinate and bear fruit. She scans continuously for signs of progress and uses them to propel her team forward, what she calls “catching the small winds.” She explains, “In my coordinating role, lots of people check in with me. I keep an eye on what's going on and do whatever I can to promote the good things that are happening.” This boosts her own and others' sense of meaning. As an example, she described a current project to build an app for justice. “Lots of prisoners in Sierra Leone get stuck in jail for years because their case files get lost. This app will help people track their cases in the justice system. It's a very meaningful project, so I want to spread the word about it.”

A vivid example of marking progress to boost staff resilience came from a World Health Organization medical officer who told me about the worst days of the Ebola epidemic, when staff were overwhelmed with the task of handling contaminated corpses. But each patient who recovered and was released from the hospital left their handprint in paint on a hospital wall. Over time, the growing number of handprints became a tangible sign of progress, which buoyed employees' spirits.

Recognition. “Working in darkness without any attention” is diminishing, Dadey explains, while recognition lifts people up and gives them the strength and motivation to persist. She faced her greatest challenge during her posting in Jakarta. She was recently back from maternity leave when, on December 26, 2004, an earthquake off the

coast of the Indonesian province of Aceh triggered a massive tsunami. Dadey was one of the first foreigners on the ground in Aceh, where the dead numbered 250,000. She recalls looking down on total devastation during a helicopter flight along 300 kilometers of coastline. In the days after the tsunami, Dadey lived in a tent and coordinated the efforts of IOM staff as they arrived in the disaster zone. Due to the magnitude of the disaster, international media attention was extensive. That and the messages Dadey and her colleagues received from their Director General “were very important and motivating,” heightening the significance of their work and letting them know that their agency was fully behind them.

Compassion. Compassion for the people they serve powers the resilience of many UN employees. Like other seasoned human rights professionals, El Hage has cultivated the ability to shield herself from emotional devastation while staying connected to and drawing strength from victims’ humanity. She recalls her time working in the Taliban-controlled Afghani province of Kandahar as the most challenging of her career to date. The compound she lived in took frequent rocket fire. But she also warmly recalls the Afghani people as being exceptionally friendly and helpful. She has similar memories of her work in the Philippines during a humanitarian disaster. “Even though the people had very little, they were grateful for what they had. They were happy — and their happiness was infectious.” Similarly, Dadey added that for her staff and colleagues in the tsunami zone, “a lot of our strength came from seeing the resilience of the local community.”

Self-compassion. Compassion for oneself is just as important to resilience as compassion for others. Knowing and respecting one's limits is essential, something that El Hage has learned to do. "Sometimes my adrenaline surges and I feel like I'm shaking from the inside. When I reach that point, even though I don't want to stop working, I've learned to recognize it and to take a break. I take time off, get together with friends, stop traveling on missions for a bit." When work is at its most intense, it can also be at its most compelling, especially for people with a strong sense of purpose. But to stay resilient, it's vital to keep one's mental and physical equipment in good working order. Having outlets that promote renewal and a change of pace matter a great deal for resilience. Van Wagenen unwinds and gives her brain a rest by taking a bath, reading, or watching television. An artist, El Hage draws when she feels stressed. Whenever she returns to her family home in Lebanon on R&R (rest and recuperation), she spends time painting in her studio.

The role of self-compassion in resilience extends to career decision making. Knowing and respecting one's limits also means knowing when a work situation is personally unsustainable. El Hage offers an example: "In one post, I worked for a corrupt senior officer. I reported him, but nothing was done. So I left that post and switched to a different one. If a post is not conducive to me, I leave. I know when to move on."

Positive relationships. Positive, energizing connections to others are vital to resilience. They provide socioemotional support, a sense of belonging, and people to share experiences and ideas with. They infuse challenging situations with a sense of playfulness and optimism, heightening capacity to learn and perform. Positive

relationships, both at work and in personal life, boost self-confidence, self-esteem, and resilience.

“I find it incredibly important to have a positive focus,” Van Wagenen says. She seeks out people who are upbeat and enthusiastic, and gathers them for an informal monthly lunch. “The point of the lunch is to share positive things: progress, new ideas, things that people are excited about. It’s an informal network that functions like a boosting club.”

Dadey explains that when you’re living in a tent with other humanitarian workers in a disaster zone, you form incredibly strong bonds around common purpose and shared experiences. El Hage’s personal friendships are a lifeline that she draws strength from. She also works hard to create positive relationships at work. Despite the extreme privation she’s experienced over the years, the human suffering she’s witnessed up close, and the hundreds of times she’s had her personal safety threatened, El Hage finds political and bureaucratic challenges to be the most stressful ones. “By developing good relationships at work, I discover a lot of good in people — even those who seem difficult at first. I cultivate a lot of partners and supporters, and I stay focused on what I can contribute. I try to always be kind, candid, cooperative, respectful, and open, while also being firm. This is a great way to keep the stress level down.”

While the circumstances that UN professionals encounter in the field may be more dire than those you meet in the office, we all face challenges that require resilience to surmount. An overwhelming workload, workplace incivility, low control over your work, a

<https://hbr.org/2017/09/what-we-can-learn-about-resilience-from-female-leaders-of-the-un>

contentious relationship with your boss: factors like these put your resolve to the test. So pay attention to signs of stress and treat yourself as kindly as you'd treat your best friend. Cultivate positive relationships at work and take time to talk about the purpose that unites you. Look for signs of progress and celebrate them. Make a point of recognizing the work that others do. And connect to the humanity that lies at the heart of everyone you meet.